

RACE, PLACE, AND SEXUALITY: A CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF LGB IDENTITY  
SALIENCE

BY

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THESIS

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## **Abstract**

This study used feminist intersectionality and identity theories to examine the association between residential context (racial exposure and community climate) and identity salience among 375 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) survey respondents. I hypothesized that LGB identity salience would vary by perceived community support or rejection of LGB people such that high salience occurs in hostile and supportive communities, and low salience occurs in tolerant communities. Further, I hypothesized that LGB identity salience would vary by levels of exposure to racially similar others in one's neighborhood. Both hypotheses were partially supported. Regression models did not reach significance, but descriptive results indicate that the relationship between community climate and LGB identity salience is different for Whites and people of color such that hostile community climate has a stronger impact on LGB identity salience for people of color compared to Whites. Additionally, descriptive analyses reveal that the relationship between racial exposure and LGB identity salience is different for Whites and people of color such that increased exposure to racially similar others is associated with lower LGB identity salience for people of color, but not for Whites. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Identity refers to a person's sense of self (Stryker, 1980). William James (1890) posited that an individual possesses as many identities as the number of groups with which they interact, a potentially infinite number. Over a century later, identity is conceptualized similarly; that is, each person has multiple identities that represent components of their self-definition (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), which may vary across time and context, and are linked to social roles and statuses.

Multiple identities intersect with one another in ways that cannot be conceptualized in a purely additive manner (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). For example, there is no unitary experience of being female and African American because not all identity components are salient at all times for all people with those identities. Identity salience refers to the probability that a particular identity component will be activated. Identities are organized within a "salience hierarchy... such that the higher the identity in that hierarchy, the more likely that the identity will be invoked in a given situation or situations" (Stryker, 1980, p. 61). Placement within the salience hierarchy is determined by one's commitment to an identity, or the extensiveness (sheer numbers) and intensiveness (depth) of one's relationships in connection with an identity category.

Intense, extensive relationship networks take place within specific spaces, which affects identity processes. Some contexts clearly invoke one identity category more than others, such as "professor" being invoked upon entering a classroom full of students seated at desks instead of other possible identity components such as "parent" or "lesbian" (Stryker (1980) called these "structurally isolated situations"). Other contexts may call up multiple identities; for example, both "father" and "male" may be invoked upon entering a PTA meeting. Also, some identities may be so salient that they are nearly always activated. For example, the spousal identity may be consistently salient to an individual, although various facets of this role- caretaker, companion, or provider- may be more salient situationally.

Essentially, context matters: *where* we are affects *who* we are at that time, in that place. Therefore, it is important to move beyond "Who am I?" (generally) to ask "Who am I *in this place*?" The overall aim of this study is to examine the relationship between residential context and the salience of sexual orientation identity for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people. I will examine the racialized nature of communities, as well as the varied levels of support communities provide to LGB residents. First, I consider LGB identity, then I discuss the need for intersectionality models, which aid My understanding of sexual identity by incorporating multiple identities, including sexuality and race in the context of place.

### **An Intersectional Approach to Identity**

Intersectionality offers a more informative look into the lives and experiences of individuals who exist in multiple identity categories simultaneously, and whose identities can both privilege and hinder them. The central tenets of intersectionality are: "(a) no social group is homogeneous, (b) people must be

located in terms of social structures that capture the power relations implied by those structures, and (c) there are unique, non-additive effects of identifying with more than one social group” (Stewart & McDermott, 2004, p. 531-532). Feminist intersectionality theory decenters gender to examine how it interconnects with race, sexuality and other social positions of privilege and disadvantage.

What seem to be “universal” social categories (“Black,” “man,”) and traits (“gay”) are actually the complex product of intersections of sexuality, place, race, and gender (Zinn & Dill, 1996). This approach challenges popular notions of binary characteristics (such as gender and sexuality), as well as the explanatory power of additive models, by acknowledging that the experiences of those with intersecting identities cannot be fully understood within traditional, bounded understandings of binary identities (Walby, Armstrong & Strid, 2012). Recent attention to gender, racial/ethnic, and geographic diversity among LGB people demonstrates the importance of examining how sexual orientation interacts with other identities. An intersectionality framework is therefore beneficial to understanding the variation in LGB identity salience.

### **Sexual Identity**

Racial, gender, and place-related differences in LGB identity development may impact the degree of importance that individuals assign to their sexual orientation, highlighting the need to take other identities and multiple contexts into account when examining the lives of LGB people.

Non-heterosexual identities are “socially marked” statuses compared to unmarked, generic, and “normal” heterosexuality (Brekhus, 1996). Thus, individuals are often presumed heterosexual unless they “come out” as LGB. The fact that LGB identity development requires explanation and heterosexuality does not illustrates the privileged position that heterosexuality occupies in society. Lack of privilege and societal heterosexism are associated with the experience of sexual stigma (the collective knowledge that homosexuality is devalued by society) and hypervigilance among LGB individuals (Herek, 2007). Hypervigilance refers to heightened monitoring of oneself and one’s environment in order to avoid sexual stigma, which may increase the salience of sexual minority identity by constantly activating LGB people’s awareness of their sexual identity.

Theoretical models have been created to conceptualize and explain identity development among LGB individuals. Linear models generally assume that the “coming out” process requires individuals to travel through a distinct set of stages in a particular order. Cass (1984) for example, postulated six steps in “homosexual identity development”: identity confusion (Am I homosexual?), identity comparison (I am probably homosexual), identity tolerance (I am homosexual), identity acceptance (Being homosexual is okay), identity pride (I prefer being homosexual), and identity synthesis (Being homosexual is only one part of my identity). The process of moving from “confusion” to “synthesis” suggests that sexual orientation becomes increasingly salient and then is combined with other aspects of the self.

Stage theories have been soundly critiqued for their unitary and acontextual description of LGB identity development (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). First, linear models fail to account for racial and/or ethnic differences in LGB identity development (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Moore, 2011). Racial and ethnic minority communities, compared to White communities, may have more antagonistic views toward sexual minorities, and ethnic community hostility has been found to influence the timing and context of coming out among ethnic minority LGB people (Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004). For example, in her work with Black sexual minority women, Moore (2011) found four distinct pathways through which Black women came to identify as lesbian or bisexual. Only one pathway was consistent with linear models and it represented only 34% of the women interviewed (p. 23-24).

Another major critique of stage theories relevant to this study is the presumption that all LGB people will reach a concluding stage in their development where sexual orientation is always moderately salient (“only one part of my identity”; Cass, 1984). This presumption ignores research suggesting that women’s sexual orientation may be more fluid than men’s (Diamond, 2008). For example, sexually fluid women may place more salience on a sexual minority identity when they are in a relationship with a woman and deemphasize labels when in a relationship with a man. Stage models also privilege heterosexual identities by implying that LGB people must integrate into “heterosexual society” in order to be fully or appropriately developed (Diamond, 2011). Further, the importance that LGB people place on their sexuality may vary by geographic context and specific situations (Brekhus, 2003; Holman & Oswald, 2011).

### **The Importance of Place**

Individuals identify with and become attached to the communities in which they live (Gallup, 2010). Residential (or community) attachment captures one’s emotional connection to where one lives. Communities that provide ample space to meet people and residents that care for one another (social offerings), and those that are open to diversity on multiple levels, including racial and sexual minorities (Gallup, 2010) tend to have the most attached residents (“New York City is a great place to live”). Place-based identities indicate the incorporation of a place into one’s sense of self (“I am a New Yorker”) and these place-based identities intersect with other identities.

Place is a powerful identity because it may form the framework within which other identities develop and influence one another. Places are racialized (organized hierarchically by race); Inwood & Yarbrough suggest that “a multifaceted relationship exists between place and race wherein places are racialized while places also structure, construct, and reproduce racialized individual identities” (2009, p. 300). Places are also queered: that is, ordered and classified according to sexuality- “gay” (non-heterosexual) spaces can be distinguished from “straight” spaces (Oswald & Masciadrelli, 2008), and straight spaces are both more numerous and more socially and economically valuable (Herek, 2007). For

example, school researchers have noted the pervasive influence of White, heterosexual norms in creating and regulating definitions of acceptable behavior and academic success within school contexts, which cause additional challenges for non-White and non-heterosexual students (Venzant Chambers & McCready, 2011).

First I examine the association between place and LGB identity, and then I analyze how this relationship is complicated by race.

**Place and sexual identity: Place matters for LGB people.** Communities vary in their level of affirmation for sexual minorities. Indeed, communities may be classified as hostile, tolerant, or supportive of LGB-identified individuals (Oswald, Cuthbertson, Lazarevic & Goldberg, 2010), and this climate affects the salience of sexual minority identity. For LGB individuals, living in a community rich with LGB resources means there are places they can go and people with whom they can interact that are supportive and accepting of their identity. The experience of living in a place that provides LGB-specific spaces and resources, one in which LGB identities are publicly supported, is qualitatively different from living in a town with no resources or support. Being surrounded by supportive messages reinforces LGB identity and promotes comfortable, positive feelings regarding one's sexuality, which may lead to increased LGB identity salience (Stryker, 1980, p. 122).

Hostility within one's community may also increase sexual identity salience. However, in contrast to the salience afforded by support, hostility can increase salience by forcing LGB individuals to be constantly aware of their sexuality due to the need to monitor threats of discrimination or violence (Herek, 2007). Discrimination against LGB-identified individuals exists in many forms; it may be physical violence against individuals or their property, verbal or emotional abuse, employment or financial disadvantages, as well as sweeping institutional and legal policies. LGB individuals may therefore become hypervigilant of others and monitor their own behavior to avoid enacting stereotypes that may reveal their sexual orientation (e.g. avoiding gender transgressions). LGB identity may thus become salient due to the hypervigilance required by hostile communities.

Tolerant communities, on the other hand, may decrease sexual orientation identity salience. For example, in a study of sexuality in the suburbs of a large Northeastern city, suburban gay men report "suburban" identity as more important to their sense of self than "gay," even though they describe gayness as one of their defining characteristics (Brekhus, 2003). The men described their communities to be organized around the idea of suburbia as generic and homogenous, and although the community tolerated them as gay, too much emphasis on a distinguishing characteristic such as gayness (LGB identity) would not have been tolerated. For example, the gay men in this study worried that stereotypical displays of male homosexuality, such as an overly feminine gender presentation or promiscuous sexual

behavior, would be “too gay” for their suburban neighbors. Thus, these men focused less on their sexuality and reported lower LGB identity salience.

It is important to note that LGB identity may not always be salient. For example, Holman and Oswald (2011) found that sexuality was important to nonmetropolitan LGB parents in only 55% of the situations studied, and particularly in institutional settings. Thus, the significance of community support is not derived solely from the objective number or quality of LGB related spaces and resources, but also from LGB individuals’ personal assessment of whether or not their community is supportive of their sexuality. This suggests that the importance of place is subjective and varies among LGB people.

We have seen that hostile and supportive communities may increase LGB identity salience for opposite reasons (marginality and reinforcement, respectively) whereas the “neutrality” of tolerant communities may mask LGB identities and decrease salience. In other words, identity is contextual; it is shaped by situational factors and others contained by a specific space (Brekhus, 2003; Stryker, 1980). Community climate is one such situational factor that has consequences for LGB people’s identity salience.

I turn now to another situational factor that is relevant to LGB identity: race. Racial categories are socially and politically constructed and usually attributed to “biological” differences such as skin color, where ethnic groups are based on behavioral differences and refer to shared cultural or historical backgrounds. Ethnicities may encapsulate multiple races; two individuals who both identify their race as “Black” may have distinct ethnic identities. The “Black” women in Moore’s (2011) work, for example, were a mixture of Black Americans and foreign-born Blacks from various Caribbean or African ethnic groups. Despite these distinctions, the usage of race and ethnicity in the relevant research is inconsistent. Thus, in this study the terms race and ethnicity will be used interchangeably, although the two concepts do not necessarily overlap.

### **Race, Place, and Sexual Identity: Place Matters Differently for LGB People of Color.**

The relationship between place, race, and sexuality will be discussed separately for racial minorities (people of color or non-Whites) and racial majority (Whites), due to historically differing relationships to power among White and non-White peoples that have privileged Whites over people of color.

**Racial minorities.** Among non-White individuals (both LGB and heterosexual) racial minority identity can be particularly salient, or be consistently higher in the salience hierarchy than other identities, including sexuality and gender (Hunter, 2010; Moore, 2011). Higher salience of racial identity may be due to the fact that racial and ethnic identities develop before other identities (Operario, Han, & Choi, 2008). Extended family kinship ties are also more common among racial minorities than Whites (among African Americans see Mays, Chatters, Cochran & Mackness, 1998; among Latinos see Sarkisian, Gerena,



& Gerstel, 2006), meaning that relationships based on race are often more extensive and more intense for racial minorities than Whites, leading to increased salience of racial identity among people of color (Stryker, 1980).

The social nature of community influences identity salience differently for people of color because although others publicly know them as Black (Latino, Asian, etc.), they may not be publicly identifiable as LGB. For example, some (but not all) Black gay men in Hunter's (2010) study prioritized their race over their sexuality, and many men reported compartmentalizing their identities by place; with race (Blackness) being classified as a public social identity, and sexuality as a private one, although each identity remained equally important to their sense of self. Additionally, the order in which identities develop impacts salience: women who become mothers before openly identifying as lesbian or bisexual may conceal their sexuality from their children, insisting that parenting (public) and gay life (private) exist in different spheres (Moore, 2011). Thus, residential context- where an individual lives- can drive identity salience processes by validating some identities over others, and influencing to what and whom one is exposed most often (Swank, Fahs, & Frost, 2013).

**LGB racial minorities.** LGB people of color have at least two minority identities, each of which may be more or less important to them in certain situations. Management of multiple identities involves negotiating minority and majority statuses across time and space, as well as within group differences (racial, gender, sexuality). Although race and sexuality are both stigmatized minority identities, they are experienced differently as collective identities. For example, parents and relatives of racial minorities may instill racial pride and other protective factors throughout childhood that help to avoid internalizing racism and prepare racial minorities to cope with racism in the larger society (Battle & Crum, 2007). Sexual minorities are most likely not prepared for societal heterosexism in this way (Battle & Crum, 2007). Because they are less prepared to deal with heterosexism, LGB people of color may be more likely to internalize stigma related to their sexuality than their race. Race may therefore be more salient than sexuality among people of color, because racial identity develops before other identities (Operario, Han, & Choi, 2008) and is reinforced from an early age.

Sexual stigma may be more impactful among LGB people of color because sexual identity does not receive the same community support as racial identity. Furthermore, heterosexism is generally considered less inappropriate or objectionable than racism (Herek, 2007). Among LGB people of color, heterosexism within one's racial community has been shown to have greater negative effects on mental health than racism within the LGB community (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011). Blacks and Latinos (but not Whites), for example, believe anti-LGB violence is due to or implies having negatively represented their racial/ethnic community (Meyer, 2012). This evidence suggests that although heterosexism may not be more prevalent than racism, and is not necessarily more prevalent in

communities of color than White communities, it is more pertinent to racial minority LGBs (Battle & Crum, 2007). Namely, because racial minorities are more likely to receive community support for their racial identity than their sexuality, residential context matters differently for people of color when it comes to LGB identity salience.

**Racial exposure.** Neighborhood racial composition may set the parameters for identity by marking individuals as either different or similar to others, and this distinction may be linked to LGB identity salience. As fully “out” lesbian and bisexual Black women, Moore’s (2011) participants varied in the degree of importance (salience) that they placed on their sexual orientation; these differences were related in part to the community contexts in which the women lived. Specifically, Black lesbian women who were the first to integrate White institutions- the only Black student in their school, a member of the only Black family in a neighborhood- and those who worked in high status (predominantly White) occupations tended to rank their race as more important than both their gender and sexuality compared to other Black lesbians (Moore, 2011). In communities constructed around racial lines, LGB identities are less valued and validated by the environment, and may become less salient to the individual- none of the Black women in Moore’s work ranked sexuality as their most important identity, for example (2011). Thus, for people of color, the importance of LGB identity may be minimized as the number of racially similar others in one’s community increases.

For racial minorities, LGB identity may be downplayed or concealed to avoid negative outcomes, both outside and within one’s racial community. Racial minority LGBs, including those who have successfully integrated their racial and sexual identities, may conceal their sexuality in contexts that have higher concentrations of racially similar others, particularly their families (Operario, Han & Choi, 2008). The presence of relatives in one’s residential community, and their knowledge of one’s sexual orientation may influence identity salience, for example by creating a perceived need to uphold family status in the community by suppressing sexuality (Chung, Oswald & Wiley, 2006; Moore, 2011; Operario, Han & Choi, 2008). There is a long tradition within African American communities of a concern with presenting the best possible version of oneself in public, in order to set a respectable example for other African Americans to follow, and to counter the negative racial stereotypes (Moore, 2011). Deviations from the modal path to success, sexual or otherwise, should be hidden from the public eye in order to uphold the respectability of one’s family and racial community. The proximity of relatives who may have negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, may lead to decreased salience of LGB identity among racial minorities, to avoid jeopardizing their sense of belonging within their homes and communities. In this study, I recognize family proximity as part of individuals’ general ratings of community climate, although I am unable to separate the two concepts.

**White LGBs.** Unlike racial minorities, research on White (racial majority) LGB people suggests that sexual minority identity is more salient than race due to the privileges of racial majority status (Brekhus, 2003, Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Operario, Han & Choi, 2008). Similar to heterosexuality, “White” as a racial identity is frequently overlooked in the literature as well as within colloquial discourse as it is considered normative, unmarked, and generic, if considered at all (Newman, 2012). For Whites, race is not often a salient identity component (Steck, Heckert & Heckert, 2003). For example, the percentage of Whites who consider their race important is much lower than that of non-Whites (37% and 72%, respectively; Croll, 2007). Accordingly, sexuality becomes more salient for White LGB people as a distinguishing identity.

Accustomed to both racial and heterosexual privilege, Whites may experience a lack of privilege after coming out as LGB, which may also increase the salience of their sexual orientation identity. LGB people of color, on the other hand, may decrease the salience of their sexuality in favor of racial solidarity. In other words, although identity salience may be increased by marginality, exposure to racially similar others is hypothesized to affect LGB identity salience differently for Whites and racial minorities.

## Chapter Two: The Current Study

This study adds to both the sexuality and racial minority literatures by linking these identities to place. The majority of research concerning sexual minorities has been conducted with affluent, White, metropolitan samples, and the majority of work regarding racial minorities has excluded sexual minorities (Moore, 2011). Although LGB identity has been investigated outside of metropolitan settings (Brekhus, 2003; Holman & Oswald, 2011), place-based identities are not often considered within the small literature on the intersectionality of race and sexuality. For example, although 65% of the Black gay men in Hunter's ethnographic study grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods, racial exposure was not taken into account in his analysis of participants' racial and sexual identities (2010).

The previous discussion has detailed the importance of community level factors- specifically, community climate and racial context- on sexual minority identities, which may be differentially important for White LGBs and LGB people of color. What is still relatively unknown is how living in a residential area that contains a higher percentage (although not necessarily a majority) of racially similar others affects LGB identity salience. Additionally, the impact of community climate (toward LGB individuals) on the salience of sexual identity has not been well explored. This study integrates the literature on identity and intersectionality to address the association between community climate, residential segregation, and sexual orientation identity salience among 375 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants.

First, I was interested in the ways that community support or rejection may impact LGB identity salience, and therefore asked: What is the relationship between community climate and LGB identity? My specific hypotheses are:

1. LGB identity salience will vary by the perceived supportiveness of one's residential community. Specifically, high LGB identity salience will occur when community climate is perceived as supportive or hostile for LGB individuals (in other words, feeling supported or rejected by your community as a LGB person will be associated with placing more importance on your LGB identity). Low LGB identity salience will occur when residential communities are perceived as tolerant of LGB individuals.
- 1.1. The relationship between community climate and LGB identity salience will be stronger for racial minorities than Whites.

Second, I was interested in the ways that racial exposure may impact LGB identity salience. Instead of dismissing the *Rainbow Illinois* sample as majority White and ignoring the small percentage of non-White participants, I chose instead to racialize all participants by considering each individual's race in the context of the racial composition of his or her neighborhood. Within this aim, I asked: Does

exposure to racially similar others matter more or less for racial minorities when compared to Whites? My specific hypotheses are:

2. LGB identity salience will vary by level of exposure to racially-similar others within one's residential community.
  - 2.1. Specifically, among White LGB individuals, high LGB identity salience will occur when there is high racial similarity (in other words, Whites will place more importance on their LGB identity when they live in a community with a greater percentage of Whites).
  - 2.2. Conversely, I expect to find an inverse relationship between salience and exposure among racial minorities. In other words, for racial minorities, being racially similar to others in their zip code will be linked to placing less importance on LGB identity.

## **Method**

**Setting.** The data used in this study were collected as part of a larger research project investigating the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) identifying residents of non-metropolitan areas in Illinois (Oswald & Holman, 2013). Oswald surveyed the downstate Illinois LGBT community in the spring and early summer of the year 2000, and again from November 30, 2010 through May 31, 2011 (data collection was intentionally closed the day before civil unions became legal in Illinois; Oswald, & Holman, 2013). This study uses only the more recent wave of data collection.

It is important to note that this is a study of a particular place (downstate Illinois) with particular racial configuration that is meaningful to those who live there. Because the region is mostly White, the experience of being non-White in downstate Illinois is different than being non-White in more racially diverse areas, or areas in which racial minorities are in the majority. The fact that the sample is mostly White (90%) and female (62%) is representative of larger population estimates of the region (Hixson, Hepler & Kim, 2011; Howden & Meyer, 2011).

**Procedure.** The 2011 survey was electronically mailed using organization mailing lists and volunteers who distributed surveys through their social networks. All membership information was kept confidential; I do not know who received an invitation to participate. As a result I cannot calculate response rate. Although 550 individuals electronically filled out the survey, some of them identified as heterosexual or failed to provide their race or zip code. Because this project is specifically about the downstate Illinois LGB community, survey respondents who did not report both a LGB identity and a downstate residence were dropped, leaving 458 participants. Race was also of particular interest in this study. Therefore, those who chose not to report their race/ethnicity ( $n = 83$ ) were also dropped, leaving a final sample of 375.

Additionally, individuals responding to the survey may not have answered every question. For some, sections of the survey were not relevant and an automatic skip pattern was used; they would not be

asked parenting questions if they did not identify as a parent, for example. Thus, although the total sample size for the current paper is 375, the number of individuals who responded to each question may be different. Percentages reported below are based on the number of people who answered that specific question and reported both their race and zip code.

**Sample.** The population for this study was all lesbian-, gay-, bisexual-, and transgender-identifying residents of downstate Illinois (“downstate” refers to all of Illinois south of Interstate 80, outside of the Chicago metropolitan area). Strategic sampling was used, as random sampling from this population was not possible. It is estimated that approximately 9 million people in the United States (Gates, 2011), and approximately 3.8% of Illinois residents identify as LGBT (Gates & Newport, 2013), however, an exact population is unknown.

Respondents were recruited via organizational mailing lists (e.g., local Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG)) and social networks. Upon completion of the 2011 *Rainbow Illinois* survey, respondents could leave the survey and enter themselves into a lottery for the chance to win a \$25 gift card. Random selection was used to identify 10 lottery winners and their gift was mailed to the electronic or land address provided.

Forty-two percent of respondents identified their sexual orientation as lesbian, 32% as gay, 16% bisexual, and 10% other (queer or pansexual). Ninety percent of the sample identified their race as exclusively White, 2% as Alaskan Native or American Indian, and approximately 3% of participants identified in each of these categories: African American, Latino, and Asian or Pacific Islander. Respondents’ age ranged from 17 to 74 years ( $M = 38.8$ ,  $SD = 13.8$ ), and there were more women (63.5%) than men (36.5%). The sample was well educated, with 86% of those ages 25 and over having achieved at least a Bachelor’s degree. Median household income in 2011 dollars was \$50,001-60,000. Respondents resided in 58 communities across 34 counties in downstate Illinois; these numbers are representative of county estimates of the number of same-sex partners in Illinois (Gates & Cooke, 2010).

### **Ethical Issues**

I am unaware of any ethical issues with *Rainbow Illinois* or the current project. Participants volunteered to participate in the study and provided electronic consent. Their information remains confidential, as only group level information, and not individual responses, is reported. The survey was approved by the UIUC Institutional Review Board, and funded by a grant from the UIUC Research Board.

### **Measures**

The complete 2011 *Rainbow Illinois* survey contained 78 multiple choice questions and 4 open, short answer questions. The full survey asked questions about how open participants are with others about their sexual orientation (outness), religiosity, mental and physical health, experiences with prejudice, the legal recognition of their relationships, and parenting, among other topics. Participants also rated the

climate toward LGBT people (supportive, tolerant, or hostile) in their residential community, place of worship, and workplace. For the purposes of this study, only certain variables were included in analysis. Specifically: sexual orientation, sexual orientation salience, sex, race, and perceived residential community climate. In addition, a measure of exposure to racially similar others was computed using census data, and attached to each participant by zip code. Descriptive statistics for all measures are provided in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Descriptive statistics for study variables (N = 375)*

Variable	Racial Minority n = 36	White n = 339
LGB Identity Salience	$M = 3.33$ ( $SD = .99$ )	$M = 3.58$ ( $SD = 1.01$ )
Community Climate	$M = 2.31$ ( $SD = .58$ )	$M = 2.16$ ( $SD = .52$ )
Hostile	5.6%	6.8%
Tolerant	58.3%	70.3%
Supportive	36.1%	22.8%
Racial Exposure	$M = .08$ ( $SD = .06$ )	$M = .75$ ( $SD = .11$ )
High (above group mean)	44%	50%
Low (below group mean)	56%	50%
Sex		
Female	66.7%	63.1%
Male	33.3%	36.9%

*Note.* Race is collapsed into two categories in this table, but not in calculations of individual racial exposure scores.

**Dependent variable: LGB identity salience.** Identity salience is frequently discussed in the theoretical literature (Stryker & Serpe, 1994, for example), but no validated or standardized measures exist to my knowledge. The *Rainbow Illinois* survey asked a single question regarding global salience (“How important or central is your sexual orientation to you?”) that was rated on a 5 point Likert-type scale, ranging from (1) *Not at all important*, (2) *Sort of Important*, (3) *Important*, (4) *Very Important*, and (5) *Extremely important*. Scores for this sample ranged from 1 to 5 and the distribution are statistically normal ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1$ ).

**Independent variable: Perceived community climate.** Perceptions of residential community climate for LGBT people were assessed using a single item measure (“What is the climate toward LGBT

people where you live?”), to which respondents rated their home community as either: 1 (*hostile*), 2 (*tolerant*) or 3 (*supportive*). Community climate was dummy coded into three nominal contrasts: hostile (6.7%), tolerant (69.2%), and supportive (24.1%).

**Independent variable: Race.** Race was dichotomized and dummy coded (White = 1, non-White = 0) to retain power, as there were very few respondents in any of the racial minority groups (see sample description). Respondents were 90.4% White, 9.6% non-White.

**Interaction term: Perceived community climate \* race.** To test the moderating effect of race on the relationship between perceived community climate and identity salience, a set of interaction terms was computed. Centering was not done because all variables in the set were dichotomous. Using “tolerant” as the reference category, “support” and “hostile” were each multiplied by “race.” The resulting two product terms were then used in the analysis.

**Independent variable: Racial exposure.** The racial exposure index calculates “a given group’s exposure to all racial groups, including itself, in the form of a weighted average depicting the racial composition of the neighborhood of the average person of a given race” [Social Science Data Analysis Network (SSDAN), 2010]. Below is the SSDAN formula for calculating racial exposure. Because *Rainbow Illinois* respondents identified their residence by zip code rather than census tract or other proxy for neighborhood, I modified the original SSDAN formula by substituting residential zip code for

$$P = \sum_{i=1}^n \left( \frac{P_{1i}}{P_1} \right) \left( \frac{P_{2i}}{T_i} \right)$$

neighborhood:

- where
- P1 = city -wide White population
  - P1i = zip code *i* White population
  - P2i = zip code *i* population of Group 2 (minority group)
  - Ti = zip code *i* total population
  - n = number of zip codes in city (which in some cases =1)

To calculate racial exposure scores specific to each *Rainbow Illinois* respondents’ race and residential community I attached population data from the 2010 census (Minnesota Population Center, 2011). This required me to align self-reported racial identities with 2010 census categories, and to define “city-wide” as an aggregation of zip codes rather than using legal municipal boundaries.

First, I created 5 racial dummy variables: White, Black, Native, Asian, and Latino. This was accomplished by matching the racial categories in *Rainbow Illinois* with those in the 2010 census. “White” included those who chose White and no other race on the survey, and was matched with census data for “Not Hispanic or Latino: White alone.” “Black” included only those who reported being Black or African American and no other race on the survey, and “Not Hispanic or Latino: Black or African American alone”



on the census. The “Native” category included those who chose “American Indian or Alaska Native” and no other race on the survey, and was matched with “Not Hispanic or Latino: American Indian and Alaska Native” from the census. “Asian” included those who chose Asian or Pacific Islander on the survey, and both “Not Hispanic or Latino: Asian alone” and “Not Hispanic or Latino: Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” alone on the census. Individuals who reported being Hispanic or Latino were included in the Latino category, even if they also chose another race, and this category corresponds with the “Hispanic or Latino” category in the census.

Second, I retrieved population data for each racial category within each zip code reported in *Rainbow Illinois*.  $P1_i$  was the White population in a specific zip code.  $P2_i$  was the population of a specific racial minority group within a specific zip code. Thus, for each zip code I used 5 different  $P2_i$  scores, one for each of the race categories. Total zip code population scores ( $T_i$ ) were calculated by summing the total population of all racial groups in the zip code.  $P1$  (city-wide White population) was computed by summing all of the  $P1_i$  scores within that municipality.

Finally, I plugged this information into the SSDAN racial exposure formula: the population of Whites in a zip code was divided by the number of Whites in the municipality, and the result was multiplied by the zip code population of the target racial minority group divided by the total zip code population. This process was repeated 5 times for each zip code, once for each racial category (including White). For cities that encompassed more than one zip code, the results were summed, separately for each racial group. Each *Rainbow Illinois* respondent was then assigned the one score that measured racial exposure to other people of their race within their zip code. Scores could range from 0 to 1 ( $M = .687$ ,  $SD = .224$ ), with higher scores indicating greater exposure to racially similar others within one’s residential community. Within any zip code, for example, an African American respondent received a different racial exposure score than a Latino respondent, but the same score as all other African American respondents in that zip code. Therefore, each respondent’s score represents the number of racially-similar others as defined by the respondents’ own race. The final racial exposure variable used in the regression was group mean centered, meaning that scores reflect each individual’s level of exposure to racially similar others compared to other individuals of one’s racial category (White or non-White), see descriptive analysis below.

## **Data Analysis**

**Descriptive analyses.** I began the analysis by exploring the data descriptively. Inspecting the racial exposure variable revealed two distinct distributions – one for Whites and one for non-Whites. Specifically, Whites had racial exposure scores that ranged from .639 to .984 ( $M = .75$ ,  $SD = .11$ ), and the racial exposure scores for non-Whites ranged from .002 to .207 ( $M = .08$ ,  $SD = .06$ ). In other words, the lowest racial exposure score for a White respondent was larger than the highest racial exposure score for a

non-White respondent. Thus, when centering racial exposure scores I used the group mean for each racial category (White or non-White), rather than the grand mean, to center each respondents' score around the mean for their own racial category. Because the racial exposure variable is broken down by race, I was unable to create an interaction term using race and racial exposure due to collinearity between the two variables.

**Regression.** Data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics 22, using a single linear regression model to test both sets of hypotheses (see Table 2). Variables were entered into the regression model in two blocks. Block one included community climate (hostile and supportive) and racial exposure to test for main effects of these two variables, respectively. In block two I added race (dummy coded such that White=1) and the two interaction terms (Hostile\*Race and Supportive\*Race).

Block 1:  $Y = a + b(x1) + b(x2) + b(x3) + \text{error}$

Block 2:  $Y = a + b(x1) + b(x2) + b(x3) + b(x4) + b(x1*x4) + b(x2*x4) + \text{error}$

Where:

Y = salience of sexual orientation

a = intercept

b = slope

x1 = hostile community climate

x2 = supportive community climate

x3 = racial exposure

x4 = race

Table 2.

*Sexual orientation salience regressed on community climate, racial exposure, and interaction terms*

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B (SE)</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
(Constant)	3.50 (.06)		55.97***	3.14 (.22)		14.31***
Hostile	0.41 (.22)	0.10	1.89^	1.30 (.77)	0.32	1.69^
Supportive	0.09 (.13)	0.04	0.74	0.32 (.36)	0.14	0.90
Racial Exposure	-0.72 (.54)	-0.07	-1.32	-0.64 (.55)	-0.06	-1.16
Race				0.39 (.23)	0.11	1.70^
Race*Hostile				-0.99 (.78)	-0.24	-1.26
Race*Supportive				-0.23 (.38)	-0.09	-0.60
<i>F(df)</i>	1.72 (374)			1.50 (374)		
Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.006			.008		
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> change	--			.01		

\*\*\*  $p < .00$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , ^  $p < .10$

## Chapter Three: Results

### Regression Results

**Hypothesis one: community climate and LGB identity salience.** First, I hypothesized that LGB identity salience would vary by the perceived supportiveness of one's residential community (see Table 2). As predicted, regression results indicate that compared to tolerant communities, LGB identity salience is higher among LGBs who live in communities that they perceive to be hostile ( $b = .41, p < .10$ ) or supportive ( $b = .09, p > .05$ ) of LGBT people, compared to tolerant communities. Although model 1 was not statistically significant, the relationship between hostile community climate and LGB identity salience approached significance ( $p = .06$ ). In model 2, the interaction between community climate and race was not significant in the model, see descriptive results above. Thus, hypothesis one was partially supported, as LGB identity salience and community climate seem to be related in the predicted direction, despite non-significance.

**Hypothesis two: racial exposure and LGB identity salience.** Next, I hypothesized that LGB identity salience would vary by level of exposure to racially similar others within one's residential community (see Table 2). Regression results revealed a non-significant trend in the predicted direction such that racial exposure is negatively related to LGB identity salience ( $b = -.72, p > .05$ ). In model 2, however, race is positively related to LGB identity salience ( $b = .39, p < .10$ ) such that Whites have higher LGB identity salience scores when controlling for community climate and racial exposure. Thus, it appears that the negative trend reflected in the racial exposure coefficient is due to the people of color in the sample, not the Whites.

## **Chapter Four: Discussion**

The goal of this paper was to investigate the ways that context influences the importance people place on their sexuality. I chose to examine how two representations of context- racial exposure and community climate for sexual minorities- impact the salience of sexual identity among LGB individuals. I built upon existing literature on identity salience and development by utilizing an intersectionality framework to understand sexual identity in the context of racialized and queered communities. Although the model failed to reach statistical significance, results indicate that the variables are related in the predicted directions.

I found that the importance LGB individuals place on their sexual identity varies across context, providing support for intersectional analyses that take place-based identities into consideration. Additionally, in support of previous work that has discussed the importance of community climate on LGB residents' well-being (Oswald, Cuthbertson, Lazarevic, & Goldberg, 2010), this research has set the stage for further investigation in this area. In order for research and knowledge in this, or any field to progress, we must develop a basic understanding of the relationships between the variables and concepts of interest. This study provides a starting point upon which future research on LGB identity salience can build. This study also opens the door for future research into the complex way in which sexual minorities experience their sexuality and the ways that community level factors such as support, hostility, and racial exposure may influence their self-evaluations.

Currently, understanding of LGB individuals is limited due to research that has focused too narrowly on the experiences of White, affluent sexual minorities living in metropolitan areas. This work fills a gap in the literature by racializing all participants in a nonmetropolitan sample. In this study I was able to investigate the influence of racial exposure on social identities other than race (sexuality). Instead of using racial exposure as a purely descriptive measure, I chose to use it as an independent variable and examine its relationship to other variables of interest. This study also adds to the literature by taking a quantitative survey and census data and placing them in conversation with a body of largely qualitative literature on the experiences of LGB people of color.

My results show the importance of racial context for sexual minority identity and support the idea that multiple identities are created and negotiated within particular spaces, and the characteristics of these spaces influence these identity processes. Data also indicate that the relationship between these variables may be differentially important for White LGBs and LGB people of color, due to historical differences in family structure, neighborhood segregation, and relationships to power.

### **Limitations**

My work must be considered in the context of its limitations. First, this was a secondary data analysis, which led to many challenges. For example, because racial and ethnic differences were not the

focus of *Rainbow Illinois*, race and ethnicity were not differentiated and the salience of respondents' racial and ethnic identities was not assessed. Although the survey investigates respondents' experiences and feelings about their gender identity, it does not explicitly address gender identity salience. I thus focused on sexual orientation, and was unable to fully investigate the experiences of the (few) transgender survey respondents.

Second, and most importantly, I was limited by an extremely small sample of non-White respondents and geographical limitations in racial exposure. Although the racial composition of the sample is representative of the region, I lacked power to detect small effects. The small sample also required that I dichotomize race into White and non-White, which masks the nuanced experiences of various racial groups. I did my best to address this issue by utilizing racial exposure scores specific to each respondent's race. However, the proportion of non-Whites compared to Whites in this region lead to limited variability in racial exposure.

### **Directions for Future Research**

It is important that future research evaluate the salience of multiple identities to fully investigate how these identities intersect and influence one another (Stryker, 1980, p. 131). The integration of multiple identities (having positive feelings about each simultaneously), or dual identity development, is associated with various positive outcomes including self-esteem, HIV prevention self-efficacy, and higher life satisfaction (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni & Soto, 2002). My results support previous qualitative work that suggests sexual identity is not always the most important identity component to LGB people across time and space (Brekhus, 2003; Holman & Oswald, 2011).

In the future, multiple identities should be measured at multiple time points in order to fully appreciate the shifting nature of identities. This study looked at LGB identity salience at a single time point; however, previous research has shown that identity salience varies across time and space (Holman & Oswald, 2011). Switching between various identities components based on situational factors is adaptive in maintaining a positive self-concept and self-esteem (Shih, Sanchez, & Ho, 2010), particularly for members of stigmatized groups such as sexual and racial/ethnic minorities. Investigators should conduct longitudinal or daily diary research in the future to analyze changes in identity salience across time and space. Additionally, my analysis highlights the need for the development and validation of new instruments to aid in this research.

Future research should be conducted with more generalizable samples. In this study, I focused on a relatively small area with a particular population (racial composition, number of LGB individuals, etc.). While this specificity offers insight into the experiences of residents of this region, the results cannot be generalized to other community settings, other states, or countries outside the US. I also cannot assume

that zip code boundaries coincide with resident's own definitions of the boundaries of their neighborhoods (Coulton, Korbin, Tsui, & Su, 2001).

The general social climate toward the LGBT community broadly, and LGB-identified individuals specifically, has and is changing over time and varies by geographic location. For example, it is more common for modern day US adolescents to come out to parents and others than it was for adolescents in the past (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006), which may be due to the increased social acceptance of LGB people in recent years. Thus, it is important for similar research to be conducted with younger samples in order to keep up with the changing social and legal environment.

Mixed methods designs would also offer a more nuanced picture of the ways individuals create and sustain meaningful identities and social relationships in particularly racialized settings. Future research should also seek large enough sample sizes to conduct analyses that allow for differences across racial minority groups. We cannot assume that the particular experiences of Black LGBs are representative of the experiences of other LGB people of color. However, the majority of research on non-White LGBs is conducted with African Americans. Furthermore, research conducted among people of color would benefit from studies that include the experiences of immigrant LGBs.

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